BRITISH COLUMBIA

Ministry of Attorney General
Justice Services Branch
Family Justice Services Division

Children's Programs on Divorce and Separation

Report

March, 2003

Funding assistance provided by the Department of Justice Canada.

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Introduction

This study reviewed children of divorce and separation programs in all the provinces and territories of Canada, several states in the United States, including California, Oregon, and Florida, and Australia. This report will address the following topics:

A. Background Information

B. Types of Children's Programs

C. Assessment of Children's Programs

D. Implementation Issues

Section A. Background Information

During the past several decades the structure of the family has undergone dramatic change. The traditional nuclear family now occupies one position alongside a variety of household arrangements. One parent, stepparent, binuclear and blended families are becoming increasingly common. It is currently estimated that 40% of children under the age of 18 in Canada reside in such non-traditional family forms. The most common reason for this change is the increased incidence of divorce. Today, children are more likely to experience the dissolution of their parents' marriage than at any other time in history.

The large number of children whose parents have divorced has generated concerns for these children's well-being. Over the past two decades social scientists, representing diverse conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches, have extensively investigated the effects of divorce on children.

Since 1990 there has been a growth in the initiatives to promote and adopt proactive programs for divorcing families. An example is the growth in parent education programs. In 1994, there were 541 programs in the United States. By 1997, this had climbed to 1,516, representing half of all counties in the USA and a near tripling of the number of programs in just three years. (Arbuthnot, J., 2002). According to Cookson, who surveyed 3,140 counties in the U.S., these programs are now considering expanded services for divorcing families. The most frequently mentioned programs that are being considered are children's coping programs. Two important barriers to implementing additional programs are funding problems and low attendance (Cookson et al, 2002). (See Appendix)

While many measures, such as development of programs for parents, have been undertaken to minimize the impact of conflict on children, there are actually few court-initiated programs to help these children. Further, the Canadian federal report, *For the Sake of the Children*, clearly identified that the children's views, in most cases have been left out of decisions related to their parent's separation. Recommendation 32 of the

report, *Government of Canada's Response to the Report of the Special Joint Committee on Child Custody and Access* (May 1999) states:

> *"This Committee recommends that federal, provincial and territorial governments work together to encourage the development of effective models for the early identification of high-conflict families seeking divorce. Such families should be streamed into a specialized, expedited process and offered services designed to improve outcomes for their children".*

It is not only the United States and Canada who are considering changes, Australia is as well. Australia's *Family Law Act* was amended in 1991 to broaden the scope of counselling and mediation services to include more child inclusive practices and move away from a culture that was primarily couple-focused. Early interventions and prevention of problems has taken on a higher profile in policy. Ultimately, the goal is for children to be more effectively assisted in dealing with their parent's separation and divorce.

The program, *Custody, Access and Child Support in Canada: Report on the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Consultations* (1998), conducted youth workshops with children to elicit their views on divorce and separation. Many participants thought that mental health or legal professionals could be helpful to children when parents are separating. There was general agreement that support systems like counselling were valuable for helping children identify, understand and deal with the myriad of feelings resulting from parental separation and divorce "as long as they weren't forced into it."

During the federal-provincial-territorial consultations, it became clear that counsellor availability and responsiveness were critical factors for youths. They wanted counsellors to be available in comfortable, youth-oriented settings. Older participants wanted counsellors who not only listened, but had opinions, made suggestions and engaged in discussions with them. Honesty and accountability of professionals was also extremely important to the children.

Section B. Types of Children's Programs

Programs for children of divorce/separation have similar goals:

- To help children understand why the divorce/separation happened and make sense of their role in it; and
- To help children learn new coping strategies for dealing with upsetting feelings, parent-child conflict, visitation problems, and other stressors.

This section of the report examines differences in the various programs.
(See *Tables A and B: Comparison of Children's Programs* in the Appendix.)

Court- Connected vs. Other Programs

There are two streams of children's divorce group programs:

- Those offered through court-connected services or by government (*Sandcastles*); and
- Those offered through programs developed outside of the court setting (*Rainbows*, family service programs, and church related counselling programs). Schools often have such programs as well. This is understandable since divorce-related problems often become manifest in school settings, exemplified by an accumulation of difficulties and reduced academic performance.

There are a few Canadian court-related programs for children whose parents are separating or divorcing. One is offered through the family conciliation services in Manitoba. Another court-based program was held in the Supreme Court in Newfoundland until three years ago; however, because of lack of staff resources they have ceased. This program is now delivered by non-profit agencies. In Quebec, there is an extensive service for youth and divorce programs are offered at *Centres Jeunesse*. Three of these centers are connected to the court.

Ontario has published a booklet for children entitled, *Where Do I Stand?* that may help children in their adjustment, but relies on community-based programs for delivery of child counselling programs.

Saskatchewan Justice (with federal funding from the Child Support Guidelines) developed a children's program (including three videos), however, due to lack of staffing resources, it does not deliver it in-house. Its curriculum is freely available to agencies within that province should they wish to use it. One of the managers commented that a few requests have been made for the prepared information but she did not know if the materials were used.
Australia did offer a children's program in the early 90s using family court counsellors in the conciliation services but has had to curtail the program due to funding cuts. A number of states have court related programs.

Focus of the Programs

Programs for divorce that are designed to directly or indirectly help children take three forms:

- Educational/therapy groups that focus on helping children better understand and cope with divorce;
- Groups for parents that indirectly affect their children by helping the parents with parent's post-divorce adaptation; and
- Individual therapy (both parents and children).

Since the 1970s there has been increasing interest in programs which give support to children to cope with the separation and divorce of their parents. By 1994, there were 124 publications concerning group intervention programs. The development of the programs for children concentrated on the work of Stolberg, Pedro-Carroll, Kalter, Gerler, Johnston and Rossiter. It was found that the group format is preferred over individual sessions because it normalizes the experience of divorce, allows time for skill building and discussion, and provides a supportive network of peers who are undergoing similar stress. It is also more cost effective than individual treatment approaches, thus more children can be served.

The group experience was developed in order to help children see that they are not alone, that their thoughts and feelings are similar to many others who are experiencing divorce. The short *Sandcastles* program, for example, is a projective technique program, meaning it allows children to express or project their own feelings to the group members. Leaders are trained to offer innovative group activities that help the children discuss and focus on their feelings. Workbooks designed for the program promote discussion of important issues. Through the innovative activities, children are able to discuss issues because the activities make the experience much more interesting, fun and less intense than a didactic classroom teaching setting.

Johnston and Campbell (1988) in their book *Impasses of Divorce* describe appropriate involvement of children in a group run parallel to groups for their parents. After carefully preparing both the children and the parents all three groups (two parents groups and one children's group) are brought together. During the combined session the children convey their messages to their parents as a group through reading stories, perhaps showing prerecorded videos, doing role plays, reciting poems, presenting puppet shows and so on. Thus, each individual child's message, on behalf of themselves and their peers, is presented with anonymity to all parents.

The typical longer program consists of an eight-session program which focuses on normalizing the experience of divorce, clarifying and working through upsetting and confusing issues related to the divorce, and developing coping strategies for difficult feelings and family interactions. Other programs cover the court process, changes in the family, basic legal concepts about divorce, and building self-esteem. One program, *Rollercoasters*, was developed around Wallersteins' discussion of the six psychological tasks faced by children whose parents divorce: (1) to resolve self-blame and understand

what factors cause family division, (2) to overcome sense of loss, (3) to acknowledge permanence of divorce, (4) to alleviate anger, (5) to resume the development agenda at school and playground, and (6) to develop hope and confidence for the future.

The most common mode for experiential learning is group discussions, games, handouts, role plays, and videos. Children may create stress balls from balloons and bird seed, write a journal, develop a newsletter for parents, or construct a "loss box". How the programs are delivered seems to be limited only by the imagination and creativity of the developer. One innovative Australian program, the *Captains of Courage* program, builds its fantasy curriculum around a spaceship in the year 2080.

The process for enrolment may involve a letter sent to parents asking if they are interested. Separate pre-screening interviews with the parent and child are also conducted. Parents are asked about presenting issues and psychological problems (hyperactivity, etc). The children are asked how they feel about coming. Although many children are reluctant to attend, once they start, most finish the program.

After looking at several programs, it became evident that not only are there differences in content, there are differences in the focused intervention process. The interventions may be:

- Child-focused interventions - *Caught in the Middle* (Manitoba), *Children of Divorce Intervention Program (New York),* and *Children Experiencing Separation or Divorce* (Saskatchewan). The parents may be interviewed prior to the sessions and/or afterwards but are not part of the program.
- Parent-child focused interventions – *Sandcastles* (many states), *Children's Divorce Group* (Oregon), *Children of Divorce Program* (Arizona), *Kid's Turn* (California), *Families in Transition* (Indiana, Kentucky, and Delaware), *Focus on Children in Separation* (Missouri), *Kids Space* (Australia), *Divorce Education Program* (Florida), *Caught in the Middle* (Victoria), *Centres Jeunesse* (Quebec), *The Ark* (**BC**), the Australian programs, and *Information Children* (Burnaby). In these programs at least one parent is expected to participate. Several experts who were interviewed reiterated the point that if you introduce some skills to the child, you also need to involve the parent to make effective change.

Number and Length of Programs

The short *Sandcastles* program, which is offered in several US states, South Africa, and Holland, is a one-session program of 3.5 hours. (This program has been extended to three sessions of 70 min. in Ohio). Missouri offers a four hour program (two 2 hour sessions).

Other programs offer longer programs of 4-12 sessions each ranging from 60 minutes to two hours in length. They tend to use a skill-building experiential educational approach.

The sessions are usually offered on a weeknight from about 6:00 to 7:30 p.m., but in some jurisdictions (usually in mandated programs) they are also offered on weekends.

Age Groups

Generally, the children who attended ranged from age 4 to 15 years, but one size does not fit all. Programs that might fit one age group of children will not fit others.

While some well established programs like *Sandcastles* have developed programs for 6-7, 8-10, 11-13, and 14-17 age groups, many have not. Most programs tend to favour using their limited financial resources to work with 9-12 year-olds. It seems that the cognitive skills needed to understand the concepts are particularly applicable to this age group.

Toronto's *Families in Transition* program offers a teen group, *It's Different Now: The Young Adult's Point of View*. This 6-session group offers young adults from 14 to 17 years an opportunity to discuss the impact of separation, divorce and remarriage from their unique perspectives. The topics include maintaining relationships with parents, changing responsibilities and expectations, and problem solving.

Three facilitators commented that they thought six to ten children was an ideal number for a group.

Mandatory vs. Voluntary Attendance

All the mandatory programs in the USA are court-connected, but not all court-connected programs are mandatory. Florida, Hawaii, Kentucky, Delaware, Indiana and Missouri, all have compulsory programs for children. All the Canadian programs are voluntary.

In Florida, Statute 61.21 states that divorcing parents and their children must complete parenting and child education courses before divorces are granted. In the *Sandcastles* program used by Florida, the parent who brings the child to class is invited to sit in on the last 30 minutes of the 3 ½ hour program to discuss divorce-related issues with the group. If there is no restraining order, the other parent may also attend this part of the session.

Parents must also attend another separate class. The courses are offered in English and Spanish and they can register through internet, fax, and phone.

Getting sufficient participants to run the program is a challenge identified by a number of voluntary programs including Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia (*Information Children* and *Children and Change*). Another identified problem is reaching a broader range of children. Some parents who have been separated for several years are not inclined to send their children, despite continued parental conflict.

Most referrals come from family law judges or attorneys, therapists, schools, doctors or family court services. Recent workshop statistics of *Kid's Turn* show that 80% of the referrals came from family law judges or attorneys, therapists or Family Court Services.

Background of Facilitators

Facilitators may be mediators or counsellors employed by the state or provincial government (e.g. Manitoba), or they may be contracted professionals (e.g. *The Ark* program). The backgrounds of the facilitators are usually an undergraduate degree and/or a master's degree in social work. Many are mental health professionals or school counsellors.

Training of facilitators may be by way of formal educational training sessions, in-house training (e.g. *Divorce Discovery Groups*), or mentorship type programs (e.g. Hawaii trains volunteers). The facilitators who work with the *Sandcastles* program are required to take a one day training course. In the New York *CODIP* program, each leader has at least 10 hours of training, and participates in a 1.5 hour consultation with an experienced clinician after each session.

Ideally, the programs try to have a male and female facilitator, but this has not always happened in practice.

Program Funding Mechanisms

The program costs involve development, operation, and evaluation. The developmental costs of two programs in Canada, those of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, were borne by federal funding through the Child Support Guidelines initiatives. The province of Quebec has a large budget for such programs. In B.C., existing community-run programs are funded by charitable organizations such as United Way, the church or government services (In B.C., the Ministry for Children and Family Development and the Ministry of Attorney General). Due to cost saving measures, provincial funding has recently been cut to these programs.

Private programs struggle to survive. The *Information Children* program in Burnaby is operating on a budget of $900 for a four session program. The parents pay $50.00 and the fee for each child is $35.

Parents can help to pay for some of the costs, but not all. Some programs are free, but many of the American ones have fees. In the Florida mandatory program, for example, fees were $18.00 and $26.00 for each parent (fees are waived for persons whose income is below the federal poverty guidelines.) The *Kid's Turn* program in California is funded solely by private donations and grants. A sliding scale is used to determine the fee for parents while the children are free. Arizona's *Divorce Discovery Groups* asks the parents for a donation.

Australia has had to curtail their government run programs. Deborah Fry, family court counsellor in Australia, comments,

> *"We loved running the Children's groups and the ongoing work we did with families and children - sadly it is all about funding. A couple of years ago we lost almost half the number of counsellors so now have to focus only on the Court's "core business" – i.e. mediation and Family Reports (custody evaluations). The funding cut was political - a philosophical belief on behalf of the current government that the non-government agencies should be doing such work (because they think it is cheaper). Consequently of course, the range and number of programs has dropped down because the agencies are also very strapped for funding."*

Some programs, such as the Hawaii's *Kids First* program benefit from both public and private funding. The main public funding source is the Parent Education Fund, established by the Hawaii Legislature. The filing party with minor children pays a $35 surcharge upon filing for divorce. The non-filing party is asked to contribute $15. The current $110,000 budget pays for psychologist presenters, after-hours Court security, volunteer training programs, and salaries for the program coordinators. The Friends of Kids First, a non-profit corporation, was created to seek private financial grants to pay for *Kids First* parent books, small toys, games, and snacks for the children.

Section C. Assessments of Children's Programs

Unlike parent education divorce programs, evaluations of existing children's programs are few. Most are customer satisfaction surveys in which parents complete the surveys immediately following the completion of the program. According to the program facilitators, they were overwhelmingly positive. Some programs also had the children complete simple evaluations. The fact that there seems to be very little dropout from the program probably speaks to client satisfaction.

The evaluations of these programs, for the most part, have not provided any meaningful information about the program's impact on parent-child interaction, inter-parental conflict, child adjustment, or litigation rates, which were the primary objectives of such programs. Results from a nationwide survey of court-connected parent education programs (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999) found that only five programs assessed how child functioning was affected by program participation, and even these failed to use control groups for comparison. Many of the evaluations can be challenged based on:

- Subjective appraisals by the group leaders, parents and children participating in the program;
- Composition of the groups - the failure to include a comparison group, the use of measures of unknown reliability and validity, and non-random assignment to groups;
- No clear indications of factors that made for positive changes. We need to know why they work. Few attempts have been made to isolate factors such as age, gender, ethnic group, socio-economic status, time elapsed after the divorce, remarriage, and child-specific characteristics (such as temperament);
- There have been few long term studies as most are evaluated shortly after the sessions end without longer term follow-ups to test whether positive effects are maintained.

In addition, factors that make evaluations problematic include the fear that negative evaluations might cause a withdrawal of precious funds from service provisions, and the lack of expertise and resources within service providers to conduct complex, empirical evaluations.

Included in the Appendix are some program evaluations, *Children of Divorce Intervention Program* (CODIP) (New York), *Preventive Interventions for Children of Divorce* (Arizona), and *Kid's Turn* (California), *Caught in the Middle* (Victoria, B.C.), and *Families First - Rollercoasters* (Oregon, Georgia, Iowa).

The program that has been studied most extensively is the *Children of Divorce Intervention Program* (CODIP). (Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, Cowen (1989)). The program, originally called the "Divorce Adjustment Project", was developed by Stolberg and Garrison, and later refined by Pedro-Carroll to become *Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP).* In addition to its focus on understanding divorce and improving children's coping strategies, the program strives to enhance children's regard

for themselves and their families. The study had three groups: an intervention group, a divorce control group and an intact comparison group. Initially, all three groups were tested and it was found that the intervention group rated lowest in adjustment. Children who received the intervention reported significantly more positive feelings about their families and improved coping. They reported less anxiety and parents described them as better adjusted and more positive compared to children in the other two groups (a divorce control group and an intact comparison group). These reports should be regarded with some caution because bias from respondents (teachers) might have led to inflated positive claims because the individuals were aware of the status of the children being tested.

The Victoria, B.C. *Caught In the Middle* program evaluation showed it was successful in helping children to act independently of others, improve their school behavior, increase their sense of well being, and enhance their vocabulary. Improvements were also shown in the children's ability to talk about their feelings and to share them with their parents. The program, however, had little effect in lowering the levels of anxiety or increasing self-esteem.

California's *Kids Turn* program found it helped to reduce conflict between the parents, improved child-parent communication, improved parenting skills, and helped the children to feel better and cope with the divorce. Significant is that 15 of the 18 parents reported that as a result of *Kid's Turn*, they had an increased ability to shift from parental conflict to focus more on their children.

Parent education program research compared information-based vs. skill-based programs and found that the skill-based programs were more effective. Spring's study (Hett et al, 1999) found when information is shared and skills are taught to both parents and their children, parents are in a position to encourage and reinforce these skills at home.

Two studies in the research literature reported lowered anxiety and improvements in self-esteem. Stolberg and Mahler (1994) reported a significant decrease in children's anxiety when the intervention for the children included parent participation. Ozimo and Ozimo (1987) found significant improvement in children's self-concept when their custodial parent participated in a divorced parent's group (Hett, 1997).

In the Arizona *Preventive Interventions for Children of Divorce* program, Dr. I. Sandler (Cookston, Braver, Sandler, and Genalo, 2002) compared three groups, 1) a reading self-study group 2) a mothers only group and 3) a mother and child group, with a control group. A total of 218 families with adolescents between 15 and 19 years were re-interviewed in a six year follow-up study. The finding was that in cases where mothers were involved (groups 2 and 3) there was a significant decline in adolescent-related problems. This longitudinal study was impressive in that over time the positive effects for children increased rather than decreased in comparison with the control group. The effects were most pronounced for the children most at risk and showed up in improved grades, decreased mental health problems, decreased substance abuse, and decreased number of sexual partners. It was found there was no significant difference between the parents only vs. parent-children intervention programs.

According to Wolchik and Sandler (1997), most outcome studies have focused on documenting changes in children's adjustment following participation in the program. This is good for determining the efficacy of the program but only just touches the surface of what evaluation research can determine. For example, we don't yet know from program evaluations how many sessions are needed to produce positive changes or which activities facilitate attainment of the program goals. We also don't know the effect of a one or two year time delay on the benefits children gain from the group sessions. We don't understand the influence of social support in helping children adjust to their parent's divorce. Nor do we understand fully why some children are more resilient than others. They state,

> *"In general, research in this field began with studying whether children from divorced families differed from those in intact families and now has turned to investigate why some children exhibit continued problems after divorce while others appear to adapt successfully. A complex picture is emerging that highlights the contribution of interparental conflict, parent-child relationships, environmental changes, coping efforts, and social support in shaping the children's adjustment to divorce, but much is yet to be learned about the factors that influence the stress children experience and their ability to cope with divorce.* "(Wolchik and Sandler, 1997).

In summary, interventions have been developed for children who experience problems adjusting to divorce, and there are promising reports of the effectiveness of programs designed for both children and their parents. However, more research is needed to determine what kinds of interventions work and, especially, how they work. Hett, Spring and Salmon reflect,

> *"Debate continues over the issue of whether parent separation and divorce and family structure are the cause of the educational, psychological and social problems faced by some children. The notion that parent conflict before, during and after the divorce places children at risk has been suggested by clinicians and researchers. The one conclusion that can be drawn from the existing literature about divorce is that changes associated with divorce can be very stressful, confusing and challenging for most children. As a result, counselling programs to help children deal effectively with the concerns and issues they face are important. An additional advantage to children may be the inclusion of their parents in a counselling program, especially where intense and open conflict between parents is evident." (Hett, Spring, and Shannon, 1999)*

Section D. Implementation Issues

Several issues for government arise in considering implementation of a program for children of divorce/ separation.

Should it be a child-focused or parent-child intervention program?
Programs that involve children *and* parents seem to be more effective than those that only involve children. The agent of change is the adult, not the child. For children alone to learn skills without helping parents change limits the benefits received from the program. It is self-evident that the parents and children are all affected by divorce; accordingly, all should be involved in dealing with the process. It is recommended, therefore, that curriculum development includes a program for children and their parents.

The decision to involve parents would include ensuring the safety of all participants. Although some programs do allow both parents to attend, many do not. Of those that do, it was found that in only in rare cases did both parents attend.

Consideration might be given to linking a new program for parents and children with the *Parenting After Separation* (PAS) Program. Feedback from some clients who have attended this program has been that the course should be longer. Therefore, having a follow-up program may help families who need more assistance.

Who should deliver the program?
Should a program be developed for the Division? Should it be delivered by existing staff and, if so, what would be the effect of taking staff away from current duties to deliver the program? Would new staff need to be hired and trained? Would the program be contracted out? Funding and resources are a major consideration.

In Australia as well as in the provinces of Newfoundland and Saskatchewan, the programs were initially started by government departments, but are now being delivered by the private sector. Manitoba and Quebec still sponsor government programs for children of divorce and separation.

The Division may decide to develop a new curriculum and provide it to agencies who would like to use it. This is what was done with the Saskatchewan and the Newfoundland programs; however, little information was available regarding use and effectiveness.

Partnerships with existing programs might be a consideration in developing a new program. The advantage is that an existing program could bring their expertise and skills to the new program.

What will it cost and who will pay for it?
The cost of curriculum development, implementation (including training and materials) and evaluation requires more financial resources than participants alone can contribute. Without grants or public funding, it is difficult to finance the program. How would existing family justice services be impacted? Might federal funding provide enough money to hire additional staff to deliver the programs?

Costs might be less if an already established program such as the *Sandcastles* program is adopted. The cost to run this program would be facilitator training ($1500 for 10 participants) and workbooks ($3.75US each). Additional costs include the trainer's costs of airfare travel, a one night hotel stay in a business service hotel, and other transportation.

Should it be mandatory or voluntary?
Research shows that not all children need such a program if their parents divorce. There are many factors that go into determining how children will react to separation and divorce, not just their parent's actions. Therefore, valuable resources might be wasted by making attendance mandatory. To make the program mandatory would require more courses, offered at different times, additional staffing, policy procedures, and additional precautionary security measures.

On the other hand, the advantage of mandatory programs is that they compel people to enroll their children. This ensures a "captive audience" and numbers to support the program.

Voluntary programs struggle to get enough participants to operate the program. Parents, faced with the reorganization of their family, balancing work with free time, and facing grief over the loss of a relationship, often are challenged to gather enough energy to engage their children in a program. However, once enrolled, almost all participants (parents and children) complete the program and report a high degree of satisfaction.

Some courts have been reluctant to endorse mandatory programs for children of divorce because they view them as "therapeutic" rather than educational. On the other hand, many judges look to these programs to assist families and while they don't directly order it, there are strong pressures for clients to follow through with their recommendations. Developing a mandatory program would require the stamp of approval of the judiciary.

What about screening and safety issues?
If the program was delivered by government, policies would be needed to address the referral process. Many programs have developed a protocol for informing children and parents about the program before they start it.

Safety issues always need to be assessed in a mandatory as well as voluntary program and this would require policy development. If the program is voluntary, no extra security would be needed.

Where should the program be located?
Sessions are usually held in mental health settings, schools, private facilities, universities, child abuse prevention centers, churches, and community centers. The focus for any future program should be to ensure an accessible, safe and comfortable setting for children.

If the program is delivered by government, which family justice centers will have space? In which communities should the program be offered? Should a pilot study be conducted beforehand?

How long should the program be?
This report has discussed that some jurisdictions are offering short one-session programs while others are offering lengthier programs. The multiple-session educational groups are favored by most programs because they offer more opportunities for children to acquire new skills. Most children's programs are 6 - 8 sessions of one to one and a half hours in length.

Where the programs are mandated, the sessions tend to be short (in some cases, one 3.5 hour session). Short programs do not take the place of more intensive programs.

Which children should be included in the program?
Depending on funding, the Family Justice Services Division would need to determine where it will focus its resources. Where financial resources are limited, most programs focus on the 9 -12 age group. This group includes children whose parents are divorced as well as those who are not married.

The Division may wish to look at a specialized high-conflict program for parents and their children. The model for such a program has been developed by Janet Johnston in her book, *Impasses to Divorce.*

What existing resources (videos, booklets) are available?
Some videos and booklets are already available and have been developed by child support guidelines initiatives, for example, a booklet published in Ontario, *Where Do I Stand?* and videos produced for the Saskatchewan program. *Sandcastles* and other programs have developed workbooks. In addition, there are numerous helpful websites for children on the internet and one is currently being developed by the province of British Columbia with funding assistance from the Department of Justice Canada.

What are some objectives and principles that need to be applied to any new program for children?

Regardless of how information is provided to children in future programs, there should be a core set of *objectives* and *principles* which should include the following:

- Children should perceive the information they receive as relevant and helpful;
- Children should be treated with dignity and feel safe and comfortable;
- Children and their parents should know where and how to get additional information if they need it;
- Children's needs should be clearly addressed by the program in terms of it fitting into their schedules, and providing relevant age-appropriate information; and
- Children's rights to receive information and to be consulted should be respected.

Summary

The Canadian federal government seeks to establish stronger and clearer pathways to earlier assistance for children. They want to ensure families are directed to services most suitable to their needs, and to assist children whose parents are separating to lessen conflict within the family and manage change more successfully.

The Province of British Columbia, with funding assistance from the Department of Justice Canada, is looking for innovative ways to help both parents and children minimize the negative impact of separation and divorce on families. The readiness of the Province of British Columbia to embrace the idea of children's programs will be supported by effective and validated research and adequate funding. Of the programs which have been properly evaluated, the consensus is that they can help children adjust and they can improve their coping skills.

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